

Soviets Quote Graham on Freedom of Religion

Radio Turns U.S. Evangelist's Comments at Start of Visit Into Stronger Endorsement Than Implied

MOSCOW (UPI)—Radio Moscow today used comments made by evangelist Billy Graham at the start of his current Soviet tour to reinforce its claim that Soviet citizens enjoy freedom of religion.

"Believers in the U.S.S.R., he said, can perform religious rites in conditions of freedom an average American cannot even imagine," the state-run radio said.

The Radio Moscow report made Graham's comments on arrival Sunday into a stronger endorsement of Soviet religious policy than implied.

Graham, who was traveling to Leningrad today for the first official functions of his 12-day tour, told reporters Sunday that he stood by his comment on freedom of religion made after his 1982 tour of the Soviet Union.

'People Said I Was Naive'

"I said then that I found a measure of religious freedom in the Soviet Union, more than the average American has been led to believe," Graham said. "I still hold to that.

"People said I was naive and was not fully briefed about the Soviet Union, but that was not true."

The Soviet version of the comments by Graham, who has an official invitation to visit, rein-

forced the view of his Western critics that the Kremlin would use his visit for propaganda.

"Billy Graham was sorry that the population of the United States was poorly informed about life in the Soviet Union," Radio Moscow said.

"Billy Graham has arrived in the Soviet Union at an invitation of religious organizations of this country," the report said. All Soviet religious organizations are under government control.

4 Cities on Itinerary

Graham, 65, will tour four Soviet cities—Moscow, Leningrad, Tallinn and Novosibirsk in Siberia.

He is visiting the Soviet Union at the invitation of religious leaders representing between 500,000 and 1 million Baptists and as many as 60 million Russian Orthodox Church members.

Both religious groups have been affected by official restrictions on their worship, ranging from harassment to overcrowded churches and the unavailability of Bibles or other religious works.

Graham noted such religious hardships when he elaborated on his 1982 statement by saying a person in the Soviet Union could go to church "if he could find one and get in."